MEMORANDUM

Memo No. 20-126

TO: Trustees
Student Trustees

FROM: Camille Williams-Taylor, Director of Education and Secretary of the Board
Peter Symmonds, Superintendent, Learning Support Services

DATE: 15 September 2020

RE: **Re-Opening Plans for Special Education Delivery**

Planning for the unique needs of special education students has been a priority in the Return to School planning and requires a student focused approach. The delivery of special education programs, particularly specialized program classes (SPCs), in-person and by remote learning is complex given the range of services and supports provided to students and the unique relationship of students and educators in many of these classes.

In all cases, accommodations and modifications documented in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) are expected to be developed and implemented. In some cases, accommodations may not be feasible for students in virtual classes (e.g., preferential seating, scribing conducted by a staff member). In these cases, educator teams will consult with students/parents/caregivers to develop accommodations that will meet the needs of students.

What is the model for the delivery of special education programs for students in the regular program?
Students in the regular program who have an IEP will be supported by their classroom educator in either the in-person or virtual school model. These students and educators will be further supported by the support team (Learning Support Teachers (LSTs), Learning Resource Teachers (LRTs), and Educational Assistants (EAs)) from the child's home school.

How many students in SPCs have chosen remote learning?

Panel	# in person SPC students	# of remote learning SPC students	Total SPC Students
Elementary	979	348	1327
Secondary	439	111	550

N.B.: Numbers continue to fluctuate as corrections are made re: mode of learning.

What is the model for the delivery of SPCs?
In reviewing these choices class by class, there are relatively small numbers of students who have opted for remote learning in the vast majority of SPCs. The majority of students in SPCs have chosen in-person learning.

After careful consideration, it was determined that all students in SPCs will continue to be supported by their in school SPC educator teams. This approach provides all students in the SPC with a qualified educator team, consistent programming, and builds on relationships that may already be established. There is one exception to this approach for SPCs as noted below:

Elementary Gifted Program
The elementary gifted SPCs will accommodate remote learning students with two models due to the distribution of students selecting in-person and remote learning across sites, the delivery of the SPC in both English and French Immersion, and the specific grade configurations. Most elementary gifted SPC sites will maintain responsibility for their remote learning students and have been supported with additional teacher staffing allocations. One intermediate English Gifted SPC will be added to an elementary virtual school to serve English remote Gifted learners from four SPC sites. Specific sites have been provided with this information and corresponding staffing allocations.

Will integration opportunities exist for students in a SPC?
Opportunities for integration will still exist where it is feasible at the school level and scheduling allows the number of direct and indirect contacts for students are limited to about 50 for elementary students and 100 for secondary students. This is a challenge at some sites hosting the Learning Disabilities Specialized Intervention Program (LD SIP). Because of the way some sites are structured with combined grade classrooms, it is not always possible to provide the half-time integration opportunity for those students. In those cases, additional staffing has been provided to maintain the LD SIP student cohort for the full day.

Why was this model selected?
This model provides for more stability for students, families/caregivers and school teams during a time of tremendous uncertainty. School educator teams know their students the best and can quickly provide guidance and support in the development of IEPs as well as direct service to both in-person and remote learners.

Staff are aware that transitions for many students with special education needs can be particularly challenging and, after a prolonged absence from in-person learning due to COVID-19, believe that it is important to introduce a return to school with as much consistency as possible.

In addition, it is anticipated that the model will result in the following benefits to students and educator teams:
- Maintained connection to the in-person SPC community with educator teams who know the student;
- Availability of qualified educators to deliver the program;
- Increased flexibility to transition students to in-person learning over the course of the year;

- Limited disruption to in-person SPC staffing teams; and
- Maintained staffing allocations to schools to provide additional assistance in supervision of in-person learners.

What are some of the anticipated challenges with this model?
This model has challenges, but we believe with the right planning and support the challenges can be addressed and students will be well supported. For example, educator teams will be required to collaborate and plan in order to ensure the needs of students are met. This will involve ongoing communication between team members as well as ongoing communication with students and parents/caregivers.

The use of technology to support remote learners has some challenges for both staff and students. Some staff are concerned about managing both the in-person learning and the remote learners as it relates to privacy, technical proficiency, staff workload, and meeting the needs of students. Some of these concerns can be addressed through training, positioning of cameras, making deliberate choices on when cameras and microphones are turned on, and regularly circulating among all students.

How have you arranged support for the model?
The Ontario College of Teachers provides guidance for educators on the use of video conferencing, "Ways to connect with learners using video conferencing." This resource provides basic guidelines for educators as they make instructional decisions related to connecting with students virtually.

Staffing allocations for LSTs and LRTs have remained intact in an effort to support the special education delivery model. In some cases, allocations for LRTs were enhanced in order to ensure the provision of remote special education supports in situations where the distribution of in-person and remote learners posed a larger challenge for school teams.

EA allocations in SPCs were left unchanged except in the case of students enrolled in these classes who receive highly specialized support (Deaf/Hard of Hearing, Blind/Low Vision). In most cases, EAs are assigned for safety, behaviour and medical reasons. The needs of remote learners in this regard are significantly different than the needs of in-person learners. In some cases, school enrolments for in-person learning have declined significantly. In these circumstances, some of the remaining EA allocation at the school level have been reassigned to the remote school.

Learning Support Services (LSS) has worked with Business & Learning Technologies and, along with the Itinerant Teachers of Assistive Technology (ITATs), have been trialing various technology options that would support the delivery of special education services in a hybrid model. In addition, professional learning opportunities are available for staff members to enhance their capacity with respect to the requirement for a Learning Management System (LMS) and the delivery of programs in a virtual environment.

What other options were considered?
In exploring the best way to serve students, staff also explored the option of fully replicating the SPC model in the virtual school environment in two ways:

- Maintaining the current number of in-person SPCs and creating a sufficient number of virtual SPC classrooms, by specialized program area, to support the number of students choosing remote learning; or,
- Reducing the number of in-person SPC's and redeploying the staff to the virtual classes that were created.

Why weren't these options selected?

When reviewing the number of students in SPCs who selected in-person versus remote learning, the distribution of students varied considerably by class. There were no clear breakpoints to establish class sizes for virtual and in-person classes.   For remote learners, it would have been possible to group students with similar learning profiles from different sites into virtual classes. However, for in-person learners, it would have required the District to combine students with very different exceptionalities into one class (at sites which host multiple SPCs) or have classes with very high staff to student ratios (as high as 1:1, at some sites). This option was put aside because of concerns about ability to meet student needs, equity in the approach to SPCs and cost, given the likelihood that there would need to be a significant increase in staffing.

Another option that was explored was the possibility of collapsing SPCs and moving in-person learners between sites. This option would have required students to move from their home school to another location where groups approaching the regulated class size could be realized. Students would have been separated from their peers and be required to join other programs for in-person learning which would have been very stressful for some students. This is a transition that is not expected for other students attending school in-person and it was felt that this was an unreasonable burden to place on students in SPC's. In addition, this model could add significant pressure on transportation requirements, which are already severely constrained.

Finally, staff remain committed to ensuring the capacity to accommodate students with special education needs should it be necessary for them to shift from remote school to in-person learning. If the District redistributed SPCs as described above, it would have limited our ability to meet the personalized needs of students as their situations change over the course of the year.

What feedback have you received?

As anticipated, feedback has been mixed from various community members. Pedagogically, there is strong support to maintain connections between the educator teams and the students in SPCs. LSS heard quite clearly from school teams, administrators and parents/caregivers of their strong desire to remain connected to both their in-person peers and their in-person educator teams.

Conversely, as details of the hybrid approach to support students in SPCs were developed, other concerns were brought forward. Some of these challenges identified are about workload, manageability, and how to best meet the needs of students in these programs in a remote learning environment. There is no doubt that the model requires new practices and reimagining structures and supports to equitably meet the needs of all learners. It is clear that we cannot view remote learning as a replication of the traditional, in-person model. We are committed to working with educator teams to address these

issues and provide the support and guidance that is required to implement this shift in practice.

What will it look like in practice?
Shifting to remote learning is new for everyone and has unique challenges for students with special education needs. We can be guided in our work by our understanding of synchronous learning and our understanding of special education - bringing this knowledge and skills together will be critical to our success.

Synchronous learning involves using text, video, or voice communication in a way that enables educators and other members of the school- or board-based team to instruct and connect with students in real time. Synchronous learning supports the well-being and academic achievement of all students, including students with special education needs, by providing educators and students with an interactive and engaging way to learn. It helps teachers provide immediate feedback to students and enables students to interact with one another.

In the hybrid model, a student's schedule may include a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. Teachers will maintain a LMS as directed by the Ministry of Education. This will allow students to participate from their remote location and receive feedback from the educator team with their in-person learners. In some cases, this may involve video conferencing with students as the normal interaction occurs when educators circulate in the room. Educators would strategically place a device in a location where they can circulate, check in with students, provide mini-lessons, offer prompt feedback and continue circulating around the classroom. Synchronous learning is not direct 1-1 educator support for the full period of time but rather regular check-ins and dialogue with students or at home supports regarding next steps.

In some cases, educators may choose to share a screen that is displayed both on the remote learner's device and broadcast through a projector in the classroom. In this example, a remote learner can participate in the group lesson being taught, hear the description of the task to be completed and begin the activity while the educator team circulates to provide assistance and feedback as necessary.

Depending on the level of independence, this model could also be used to support collaborative group inquiries as students work together to understand a task and to complete a project together.

LSS continues to work to support the system in shifting to the hybrid model. While exploring these opportunities, ongoing monitoring and assessment is required to ensure that any changes or supports can be implemented in a timely manner.

cc   Senior Staff
       Manager, Board Services
       Special Education Advisory Committee
       Corporate Records